

FACTSHEET

Plant Protection & Quarantine

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

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Guarding America's Bounty

Agriculture, America's biggest industry and its largest employer, is under constant threat of attack. The enemies are countless and often microscopic, and they gain access to our country in surprising ways. Their potential allies are every traveler entering the United States and every American business importing agricultural products from other countries.

These enemies include scores of insects and dozens of animal and plant diseases capable of crippling our livestock and plant industries.

Through its Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)—an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)—is responsible for keeping these pest and diseases from entering the United States.

APHIS on the Job

Seven days a week, APHIS inspectors are on duty at international airport terminals, seaports, and border stations to inspect passengers and baggage for plant and animal products that could be harboring pests or disease organisms. APHIS also inspects ship cargoes, rail and truck freight, and mail from foreign countries.

In fiscal year (FY) 1994, APHIS inspectors cleared for entry into the country almost half a billion travelers and millions of pieces of baggage. APHIS personnel also inspected nearly 450,000 aircraft that brought travelers and cargo to the United States. Additionally, in FY 1994, APHIS conducted more than 1 million inspections of commercial cargo.

As a result of these inspections, APHIS made about 2 million interceptions of illegal agricultural products. From those interceptions, inspectors found nearly 55,000 plant pests and diseases that could have been dangerous to our agricultural industry. Also intercepted were more than 300,000 lots of unauthorized meat and animal byproducts that had the potential to carry diseases that could infect American livestock and poultry.

Prohibited agriculture items also arrive in packages mailed from foreign countries. In FY 1994, about 350,000 parcels were inspected. From these parcels, APHIS inspectors seized just under 9,000 prohibited meats and animal byproducts.

In addition to inspecting passengers and their baggage, agricultural inspectors make sure that international airlines handle and dispose of foreign garbage and food waste properly, either by sterilization, incineration, or grinding into an approved sewage system.

Forbidden Fruits and Vegetables

Many passengers entering the United States don't realize that one piece of fruit packed in a suitcase has the potential to cause vast damage to U.S. agriculture. Forbidden fruits and vegetables can carry a whole range of plant diseases and insects.

Oranges, for example, can introduce diseases like citrus canker or pests like the Oriental fruit fly or Mediterranean fruit fly (Medfly). If Medfly were allowed to establish itself in citrus-producing States, the citrus industry could lose billions of dollars each year. Working together, State and Federal governments have spent as much as \$100 million to eradicate a single outbreak of Medfly in the United States.

Threats to agriculture can come in many forms. Insects and diseases can hide in packing materials made from agricultural products like straw and burlap. Straw from wheat and rice—if infected with one of many foreign plant diseases, such as exotic wheat smut—could transmit the disease to American wheat fields, causing millions of dollars in damage.

Potted plants with soil from overseas are not permitted into the United States because soil can also carry plant pests and diseases. One of the most feared soilborne pests is the golden nematode, a microscopic eelworm that attacks potato roots. It has cut potato yields drastically in Europe, where heavily infested fields produce a crop only once every 4 to 7 years.

Meat Products and Pet Birds

Sausage and other meat products from many countries are not permitted into the United States.

Animal disease organisms can live in meat for many months and can even survive some processing. Scraps of meat brought back from abroad could end up in garbage that is fed to swine. If the meat came from hogs infected with a disease, such as African swine fever, it easily could be passed to domestic swine, and a serious epidemic could result. An outbreak of African swine fever in U.S. hogs would drive up the price of pork to consumers, cost hundreds of millions of dollars to eradicate, and close many U.S. export markets.

At least 40 other major animal diseases from abroad could threaten American livestock and severely affect our agricultural economy if they gained a foothold here. Foot-and-mouth disease, which can infect cattle, hogs, sheep, and other cloven-hoofed animals, is of special concern to animal health officials. An outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease could cost the U.S. livestock industry \$10 billion in direct and indirect costs the first year.

Pet birds can be time bombs of disease for poultry and other birds. For example, parrots and parakeets can carry exotic Newcastle disease, which is highly contagious. In 1971, this disease spread widely in a major poultry-producing area of southern California. The epidemic was eradicated at a cost of \$56 million.

Live animal imports also pose a health risk. APHIS Veterinary Services employees work to ensure that live animals being shipped into this country will not bring foreign animal diseases with them and into the U.S. livestock population.

Beagle Brigade

APHIS uses detector dogs at most international airports across the country to sniff out prohibited items like fruit and meat in the baggage of incoming travelers. Known as the Beagle Brigade, the dogs wear bright green jackets and are friendly to the public. Linked to their handlers with a leash, the beagles sniff luggage for the scent of citrus fruit, mangoes, beef, and pork. If they detect these scents, the dogs react passively—they immediately sit next to the suspect bag to alert their handler.

Trained beagles with 1 year of experience have a success rate of about 80 percent. Their success rate rises to about 90 percent after 2 years of experience.

Vigilance is Constant

The 1,300 or so APHIS inspectors stationed at more than 90 ports of entry make up the first line of protection for the Nation's largest industry, agriculture. Through the inspection process, APHIS inspectors help safeguard our agriculture, the 2.1 million farms in the United States, and the food budget and nutritional choices of every American consumer.